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ABSTRACT

Principals as school leaders have the potential to transform school culture in positive ways. A review of "Principal's Role in Shaping School Culture," by Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson, is offered in this report. The book defines school culture, presents examples of principals' school improvement strategies, and compares similarities in their strategies. Five case studies illustrate the ways in which school leaders in diverse school settings have interpreted and influenced their schools' cultures. Tactics for building school culture include: development of a vision of what the school should be; selection of a staff with corresponding values; confrontation with conflict; incorporation of values in routines; and promotion of culturally reinforcing practices. (LMI)

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Research In Brief

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
Christopher T. Cross, Assistant Secretary

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The Principal's Role in Shaping School Culture

School culture is that intangible "feel" of a school, the unspoken understanding of "how things are done around here." You can sense it as you approach the building. You can almost smell and taste it as you walk through the doors. You can see it in the pictures on the walls or hear it in the chatter in the halls. School culture reflects the values, beliefs and traditions of the school community, which underlie the relations among students, parents, teachers and principals.

As school leaders, principals can influence and mold school culture in positive ways. Principals who are able to work with teachers, students and community members to create a commitment to common values and a bond between one another and the school create successful school cultures.

They all do it their own way. One wears the school "logo" on his jogging shoes. Another lights a candle, a symbolic "lamp of learning," at the beginning of the school year. Others tell stories of students and faculty who have succeeded despite hardships. All of these principals set an example of the values they wish to incorporate into the daily routine of school life—into its culture.

Fortunately, the symbolic meaning of these actions was appreciated by the school community; it is not always so. One well-meaning principal fixed up a storeroom housing old textbooks, workbooks and miscellanea during spring vacation to suprise the teachers with a workroom. The teachers had requested a workroom, and complained about the "junk" in the storeroom. Yet, when the teachers returned to school, they filed a grievance against the principal. This principal had thrown away, not junk, but the school's history and cultural artifacts.

Principal's Role in Shaping School Culture, written by Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson and published by the Education Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, provides help to principals wishing to bolster or transform school culture. The book defines school culture, presents examples of how principals have improved their schools and examines the commonalities of their strategies. This short book uses five case studies to show how a variety of school leaders—black and white, male and female—in very different school settings—elementary, secondary, rich and poor, urban, suburban and rural—have READ and SHAPED the culture of their schools.

Principal as Cultural Leader

Culture-shaping activity is often indirect, intuitive and unconscious. However, the cultural dimensions of the principal's job should not be overlooked. The principal is not only an administrator making sure that buses run on schedule and that substitutes are found for absent teachers, the principal is also:

- **A symbol** who models values in routines, dress and behavior;
- **A potter** who shapes the school's heroes, rituals, ceremonies and symbols, and who is shaped by them;
- **A poet** who uses language to reinforce values and sustain the school's best image of itself;
- **An actor** who improvises in school dramas; and
- **A healer** who oversees transitions and changes in school life.

The Voices of School Culture

Cultural leadership is the art of fusing a personal vision with a school that needs direction. This requires *both* a principal who knows what he or she wants *and* a community of faculty, parents, students and staff who believe they need a new direction to solve existing problems. To redirect the school, there must be agreement between the principal and the school community. It is crucial for the principal to correctly "read" the culture by listening to the voices of the school community. Some key sources of information are:

- **Priests and priestesses**: longtime residents who can link past traditions to present traditions;
- **Storytellers:** skilled communicators who can recount the informal school history and personify the present; and
- **Gossips:** the grapevine that carries information far ahead of formal channels of communication.

Some Culture-Shaping Principals

No two schools or principals are alike. The following case studies show that despite many differences, principals who understand the culture of their institutions, can be successful at achieving reforms.

FRANCES HEDGES, Inner City Elementary School

Ten different languages could be heard on the grounds of Orchard Park Elementary School. In this poor urban community, many students needed additional help in developing basic English proficiency. Frances Hedges spearheaded a

EA 022 133

major effort to develop a strong reading and language arts program in her school based on the belief that if students could improve their reading, other academic areas would improve as well.

Hedges hired a reading specialist. She regularly went into classrooms and worked with teachers, monitored student progress, reviewed all report cards and insisted that the librarian work with the reading consultant. Teachers and students understood the importance she attached to reading.

Several teachers resented the "intrusion" of the reading specialist. In response, Hedges organized a retreat weekend at which conflicts were aired and resolved. In the process, shared values were strengthened. The result was improved staff relations. With the entire school community working together, there was a rise in the level of student achievement.

RAY MURDOCK, Rural Elementary School

When Ray Murdock arrived at Jefferson Elementary School he faced a tremendous challenge. Overall, Jefferson was an unpleasant place to be; the exterior was dilapidated, morale was low, funds were minimal and the high proportion of transient families made it difficult to sustain parental support in this poor rural community. Murdock wanted to make Jefferson a supportive haven for students' academic growth and self-esteem.

He therefore gave teachers autonomy to select instructional strategies and then held them responsible for the results. He hired accordingly. A cohesive faculty with similar educational values created an atmosphere conducive to learning.

Murdock worked towards making kids want to come to school. Ping pong and tetherball tournaments were held, and each child met Murdock in his office for special recognition of his or her birthday. Murdock undertook small- and large-scale activities to create a school culture in which children felt secure and accepted.

With a strengthened sense of community, the dedication of faculty, and the interest of students, Jefferson became the center and focus of community life.

FRANK BOYDEN, Private School

Under Frank Boyden's leadership, Deerfield Academy transformed from a local academy into one of the nation's top private boarding schools. In the process, a tradition of loyalty to the Deerfield "family" that valued performance in academics, athletics and social service developed.

A strong sense of school loyalty and personal achievement were emphasized by the routines of student life; students ate meals together, worshiped together, retired for the night at the same time. In addition, all participated in athletics and practiced regularly.

Teachers were recruited who shared Boyden's educational philosophy. When a key senior faculty member was offered a higher salary at another school, Boyden did not counter the other school's offer. And, the teacher stayed! Being part of the Deerfield family was much more important than status or money.

HANK COTTON, Suburban High School

Before Hank Cotton's arrival at Cherry Creek, a wealthy suburban high school, the school worked on an "open campus" policy; students were free to come and go when they had no class. Sanctions for cutting class and school were not regularly enforced, and in-class attendance was below 80 percent during some classes. On the premise that attendance is the prerequisite for performance, Cotton changed the school's attendance policy.

Soon after, 235 students were suspended for infractions. Cotton was constantly on the phone explaining the new policy to irate parents. The policy gained support as it was easily explained in terms of other parental values—students have to be in class to learn.

By the 1980's, attendance became one of the highest in the district, even though students were still allowed to go to study hall or to leave the school grounds when they had no class. Attendance increased not because students feared sanctions, but because attendance became part of the school's mores—part of its culture.

BOB MASTRUZZI, Urban Secondary School

Bob Mastruzzi had the opportunity to build a culture of excellence into Kennedy High's culture right from the start, since it was a new school. Everything he said and did reinforced academic accomplishments and inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds within the school.

He bragged about city athletic championships, special academic programs and the faculty who developed them. He told Horatio Alger stories of students who overcame language and other barriers to achieve top ranks among their peers. As principal, he became Kennedy High's biggest PR man.

Mastruzzi managed to create a common vision in this school of over 5,000 students from all social classes and ethnic groups. Absenteeism was low, students applied to transfer in, and overall, those in the school and the district now view Kennedy as one of the better high schools in the system.

Common Tactics for Building School Culture

No exact science exists to tell principals how to improve their schools. These principals made educational excellence part of their schools' cultures by:

- Developing a vision of what the school should be;
- Selecting staff with corresponding values;
- Facing conflict rather than avoiding it;
- Setting a consistent example of core values in daily routines;
- Nurturing the traditions, rituals, ceremonies and symbols that reinforce the school culture.

Copies of *Principal's Role in Shaping School Culture* will be available in May from the Government Printing Office. For more information, call the Office of Educational Research and Improvement at **1–800–424–1616.**

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